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ABSTRACT

With the rapidly changing population demographics of the United States and significant growth of diverse multicultural groups, schools and professionals are being challenged on how to provide the best comprehensive educational and support services to their increasingly diverse student population. The changes between 1980 and 1990 have been dramatic. The growth rates within this time span range from approximately 13% for African Americans to 108% for Asian Americans. It is estimated that by the turn of the century, approximately 30% of the United States population will be from a racial/ethnic minority group. The challenges in working with an ever-growing pluralistic school population encompass many areas. The training of culturally sensitive professionals, a model for serving diverse learners, culturally sensitive assessment and treatment strategies, training students to be culturally sensitive, and involving parents and community as authentic participants are addressed. Professionals are also challenged by the need to consider the impact of complex social/environmental problems, which in many contexts have negative consequences for children from various racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds. Diverse students and communities can be conceptualized as wonderful and exciting elements of the world we live in, and not as hindrances to the educational process. Contains 30 references. (JBJ)

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The development of educational curriculums that enhance awareness, knowledge, and skills for students is vital in schools are to provide culturally relevant, respectful and affirming teaching environments

Working with Diverse Learners and School Staff in a Multicultural Society

by
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Overview

With the rapidly changing population demographics of the United States and the significant growth of diverse multicultural groups, schools and professionals are being challenged as to how to provide the best comprehensive educational and support services to their increasingly diverse student population. The changes between 1980 and 1990 have been dramatic. The growth rates within this time span range from approximately 13 percent for African Americans to 108 percent for Asian Americans (Sue, 1991). It is estimated that by the turn of the century, approximately 30 percent of the United States population will be from a racial/ethnic minority group (Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs, 1995).

The increasing diversity within the schools is also demonstrated by the higher visibility of other groups of diverse learners, including, but not limited to, children with disabilities, children and families identified with the deaf culture, and gay and lesbian youth.

The challenges in working with an ever growing pluralistic school population encompass many areas. The provision of relevant multicultural curriculums, the use of culturally sensitive assessment and intervention strategies, the training of school staff in the provision of these services, the recruitment and retention of multicultural and diverse professionals, and the integration of diverse communities and parents in an authentic and empowering manner are only a few of the critical issues facing those working with today's students. Professionals are also challenged by the need to consider the impact of complex social/environmental problems, which in many contexts have negative consequences for children from various racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds. Only a few of these major issues will be highlighted.

The Training of Culturally Sensitive Professionals

Although there has clearly been a greater recognition of the need for training in multicultural competence across professions, many programs still conceptualize this training as more of an "add-on"; that is, programs require only one or two courses for their particular professional specialty. This is in contrast to a more comprehensive and integrated "paradigm shift" in the teaching of all helping professional courses (Nuttall, Sanchez, & Webber, in press).

The training of school staff and other related professionals can be conceptualized by using a model that emphasizes three major components: awareness, knowledge, and skills (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992; Sue et al., 1982). The awareness component involves professionals examining their own values, myths, stereotypes, and world view. Knowledge entails developing a non-stereotyping, flexible understanding of cultural, social, and family dynamics of diverse groups, along with a comprehension of the critical sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts in which people from diverse multicultural groups are embedded. Skills require the development of culturally sensitive, flexible, and empowering treatment and assessment strategies that are accompanied by communication skills, the integration of multicultural and diversity issues in various treatment modalities, multicultural consultation, and advocacy skills.

Depending on the school, staff, and community context, flexible training can take place on many levels, such as formal multicultural issues course work, in-service training, long-term consultation and analysis, multicultural program development, and reciprocal relationships with the surrounding multicultural communities.

A Model for Serving Diverse Learners

A useful model that allows for the integration of many of these critical variables is the Ecological Model developed by Bronfenbrenner(1979) and enhanced by others (Knoff, 1986; Nuttall, Romero, & Kalesnik, 1992). According to this model, we try to understand or evaluate a student (the microsystem) in the context of his/her mesosystems (immediate family, extended family, friends, network), macrosystems (culture or subculture), and exosystems (social structures).

This model places the diverse learner, school staff, and parents/community in an ecological context, which then

allows both for a broader understanding of the critical issues affecting students from diverse backgrounds and the development of relevant service and educational models. These educational models need to be highly sensitive to the particular community and social contexts of which the diverse learners and school staff are members.

For the diverse learner and the school staff, the ability to conceptualize and integrate culture and issues of diversity within a developmental perspective is also crucial, given the changes in developmental tasks at each life stage and the various ways that these "tasks" are expressed and resolved within various cultural groups (Lee, 1995). Relevant to the diverse learner in schools, these issues must be integrated within the specialized early intervention programs offered to children with developmental issues (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). Early intervention services are an extremely important part of the total, life-stage conceptualization for low income, diverse learners because such learners are more vulnerable to developmental concerns.

Culturally Sensitive Assessment and Treatment Strategies

Through the development of multicultural competencies within the areas of awareness, knowledge, and skills, the probability increases of psychologists using assessment and treatment strategies that meet the needs of a wide range of culturally diverse groups.

The need for flexible and culturally sensitive assessment techniques has continued to be stressed by many in the field (Facundo, Nuttall, Walton, 1994; Nuttall, Sanchez, Borras, Nuttall, & Varvogli, in press). Examinations of the critical features in assessment should include the sociocultural context of the diverse learner and his family, the sociocultural background of the examiner, such as issues of awareness of biases and stereotypes, and the selection of appropriate testing, interview, and survey instruments. All of these measures enhance the possibility of more relevant and culturally sensitive assessments. Furthermore, the consideration of issues related to language and its complexities is another major factor in providing relevant and meaningful assessments.

The need for changes in the conceptualization of children's abilitiesand how skills are assessed, particularly with diverse learners, has also led to strategies that focus on problem-solving abilities. Maker, Nielson, and Rogers (1994) described the need for change in assessments within a diverse school settings, including the assessments of students who are to be considered "gifted." The authors presented various assessment programs that rely on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983) and they provided an analysis of problem-solving strategies for individual children. These procedures stress the process of problem solving and they offer an examination of each child's pattern of multiple intelligences in an attempt to get away from the more traditional and, at times, rigid analyses based on formal intelligence and skills testing. Likewise, the model of Maker, Nielson, and Rogers (1994) has great implications for the assessment of children of all levels and children from diverse backgrounds. Their model allows for individual analyses of children's particular problem-solving style and strengths, which are then encouraged, while areas for remediation are addressed.

Intervention strategies also need to incorporate the critical issues of culture and social context. Works on specific cultural groups, such as Lock (1995) on interventions with African American youth, Jackson (1995) on counseling youth of Arab Ancestry, Thomason (1995) on counseling Native American clients, Zapata (1995) on working with Latinos, and Yagi& Oh (1995) on interventions with Asian American youth, provide valuable guidelines on working with specific populations and serve to increase awareness of the specific cultural factors relevant to that particular cultural group. Awareness of, and the ability to assess, specific factors such as acculturation, language proficiency (including guidelines on the use of translators), and sociocultural history, further enhances the provision of culturally affirming treatment strategies (Paniagua, 1994; Vazquez Nuttall, DeLeon, & Valle, 1990).

The need to deal with diverse groups must also include work with gay and lesbian youth (LaFontaine, 1994) and youth with disabilities (Sanchez, in press), particularly as we proceed with educational inclusion models which are further enhancing the diversity presented within school systems.

Training Students to be Culturally Sensitive

With the changing composition of today's student population, the need to provide educational programs that address the complex issues related to multiculturalism and diversity is becoming more and more evident. Schools and educators must begin to develop curriculums that integrate awareness, knowledge, and skills within educational materials. It is critical that diversity and multiculturalism not beconceived as being accomplished by adding a course, a lecture, or a one-day "multicultural fair." A total curriculum transformation needs to take place where the critical issues of diversity and multiculturalism are integrated into all aspects of students' academic achievement, social skills development, and relationship with the community at large.

An example of such an attempt is the work of one of the authors (Li, 1993, 1994) who developed a psycho-educational course to help students increase their self-awareness, acceptance and appreciation of the self and others, and communication skills. The course was tried in two multicultural schools and in one school comprised mainly

of minority children. The response from the students and teachers of both regular and special education classrooms was positive. They noticed the nurturing climate developed through the course.

The opportunity for children to begin to integrate into their lives issues related to multiculturalism and diversity is vital to the development of acceptance and respect for others from diverse backgrounds. Along with traditional educational models that present historical and social information about people from diverse backgrounds, the creation of models that stress the development of awareness and cultural sensitivity skills needs to take place (Omizo & D'Andrea, 1995). Under this general category of enhancing multicultural awareness and respect for diversity is the critical need for confronting issues of racism and prejudice. The need for direct discussion and exploration of these issues within schools needs to be conceptualized as another critical element of the work done by those involved with the diverse learner within multicultural settings (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Involving Parents and Community as Authentic Participants

Another major component in working with diverse learners is that of establishing "authentic" relationships with parents and the community. This is a critical element of any effort directed towards increasing multicultural understanding and the development of a truly pluralistic school and community environment. To become actively involved in school is hard for immigrant parents who are not familiar with American school systems. Workshops on American schools including structure, rules, services, and the rights and responsibilities of parents and children are found to be helpful, even empowering, to these parents.

The need for direct work with parents and communities has been stressed by Atkinson and Juntunen (1994): "... school personnel must function as a school-home-community liaison, as an interface between school and home, school and community, and home and community" (p. 108). Casas & Furlong (1994), writing with regards to Hispanic parents, butoffering ideas clearly applicable to other multicultural groups, stress the advocacy role of school counselors both to "... increase parent participation and facilitate the increase empowerment..." (p. 121) of parents and the community. This is a critical role that needs to be taken on not just by school counselors, but by all school staff working with diverse learners in an increasingly multicultural environment.

Summary

Learners from diverse multicultural groups, children with disabilities, and gay and lesbian youth will continue to present challenges to schools and those providing educational and support services. The development of educational curriculums that enhance awareness, knowledge, and skills for students is vital if schools are to provide culturally relevant, respectful, and affirming teaching environments. To that end, the development of culturally sensitive assessment and intervention strategies, multicultural consultation, and professional training needs to take place. Structured along the lines of awareness, knowledge, and skills development, such actions will enhance diversity within the school environment. The diverse student and community can be conceptualized as a wonderful and exciting element of the world we live in, and not as a hindrance to the educational process. The authentic involvement of parents as active and empowered members of the school community will link school staff with the diverse learner, further increasing and affirming cultural diversity within our school settings.

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